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ABSTRACT

The elementary school principal's behavior is shaped by influences within the school district which tend to value compliance rather than individuality. The research into the behavioral characteristics of elementary school principals and the analysis of school climate provide evidence that the influence of experience in an administrative role has a socializing effect on principal behavior. In a study made of 41 principals, there was little variance noted in the behaviors associated with the administrative role. Other research indicated that the behavior of elementary school principals is developed more by expectations held for him than by his personality, and that the roles and expectations associated with school administration are frequently incompatible with the personality and needs of the administrator. (Author)

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WHAT'S IN THE SCRIPT FOR PRINCIPAL BEHAVIOR?

Implications of Some Current Research on the Behavioral Characteristics of Principals *

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WHAT'S IN THE SCRIPT FOR PRINCIPAL BEHAVIOR?

Implications of Some Current Research on the Behavioral Characteristics of the Principals

The school principal is commonly confronted with a hidden script which implicitly prescribes his behavior. The range of behavioral choices is narrow. His actions are generally rendered predictable, and he conforms "or else." These conditions are frequently cited by principals as the kinds of conditions they face in spite of the trends in modern schools where there is a popular claim to a learning setting which fosters creativity and individuality. Paradoxically, these principals are expected in most school districts to comply to a prescribed role from which it is possible to make rather accurate predictions about their observable behavior while at the same time the school demands a dynamic brand of new leadership.

An evergrowing body of research[1] shows that the school and the school district are having a pervasive and powerful influence over the principal's behavior. This influence tends to neutralize individuality and value compliance to what is expected. Compliance is the process whereby principals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are brought into line with what the school expects from them. In this sense compliance appears to be a highly valued component in the administrative role.

In studying the biographies of principals[2] it is apparent that the most commonly shared basis upon which school districts select candidates

for principalships is evidence of experience as a successful teacher. The successful teacher candidates for administrative positions are almost always chosen from the ranks of ambitious teachers who already reside within the district. School districts identify upward mobile teachers, and they make assessments as to the compatibility these teachers have with the image the district holds for successful principals. One can surmise that promotions based upon these conditions constitute a way that school districts reward compliance and make predictions about continued compliance in the principal role.

The research of the author[3] on the behavioral characteristics of school principals and school climate showed a strong similarity in the behavioral characteristics of the forty-one principals studied. These principals were found to be uniformly highly task-oriented, kindly and considerate of teachers, needing direction and support from their directors, but desirous of independence to use the direction and support to arrive at their own decisions.

As a result of his research, Bridges[4] concluded that the influence of a principal's experience may well be one of the most significant determinants of his observable behavior. He discovered that an elementary school principal's behavior is shaped more and more by expectations held for him and less and less by his personality in the course of his service.

School principals traditionally come through the ranks as teachers, vice principals and other service positions most frequently within the same school district. Apparently the influence of these experiences within a district prepare principals to behave in a predictable and uniform manner. This renders their behavioral characteristics more predictable

and makes them more interchangeable. Their observable behavior becomes consistently similar. With a script in hand the school district has a reservoir of ready actors prepared to assume the responsibilities of the role on a variety of stages. On this basis the principal's success or failure is evaluated primarily upon how well he performs within his role and less by the uniqueness associated with his personality and individuality. An elementary principal's personality is strongly influenced by the forces of socialization which tend to mold individuals to fit into roles devised for maintaining stability. Under these circumstances acts of leadership associated with innovation and change seem improbably unless they are written into the script, and in reality they seldom are.

The principal is faced with a dilemma. On one hand he is expected to function in a role which has rather specific behavioral expectations attached to it, i.e., he is expected to act like other principals. In contrast, he wants to be unique, and he wants the school to represent the new and the creative. School districts can foster growth and innovation if their scripts for principal behavior include encouragement for uniqueness and individuality. Sometimes this is called fostering leadership--a much talked about but relatively rare concept to observe in practice.

The principal's dilemma is compounded by the growing belief that schools should grow toward a more dynamic posture associated more with search and discovery than with predictability. In this setting he must learn to cope with, perhaps even encourage, the failure associated with trial and error. A lag seems to exist in most school districts between the expected behavior of principals and the behavior necessary for the

accomplishment of contemporary educational ideals. Forward looking school districts are aware of this lag and they are making specific efforts to do something about it.[5] In the meantime the principal must walk a behavioral tight rope hoping to maintain balance between the image the school district holds before him and what he perceives as relevant behavior.

The script seldom, if ever, actually exists. It exists only in the minds of those who seek uniformity even when faced with diversity. It exists in the minds of those who lack the faith and courage to confront life with pride and confidence in themselves. It exists in the minds of those who seek the safety and protection of the anonymity of the crowd. It does not exist in the minds of those who care about improving the spectacle of their own condition.

The script will change not as principals are lulled by the comfort associated with behaving as they are expected. He who follows the crowd will get no further than the crowd. The script will change and legitimate more creativity to replace conformity only as elementary principals exhibit the ability to confront situations with needed and relevant behavior in place of expected behavior. The choice is yours: you can dissolve into the mainstream, or you can be distinct. However, to be distinct, you may be different. To be different, you must strive to be what no one else but you can be.

Footnotes

1. Bogue, E.G. "The Context of Organizational Behavior: A Conceptual Synthesis for The Educational Administrator." Educational Administration Quarterly. Spring:58-75; 1969; Booth, A. and Bisztray, G. "Value Orientations, Member Integration and Participation in Voluntary Integration and Participation in Voluntary Association Activities." Administrative Science Quarterly. 15:39-45; March 1970; and Brumbaugh, R.B. "Hierarchial Role Immediacy and Superordinate Control Orientation: Notes Toward a Theory." The Journal of Educational Administration. 7:160-171; October 1969.

2. Halpin, A.W. and D.B. Croft, The Biological Characteristics of Elementary Principals. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960.

3. Wiggins, T.W. "Leader Behavior Characteristics and Organizational Climate." Presented to the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, 1969.

4. Bridges, E.M. "Bureaucratic Socialization: The Influence of Experience on the Elementary Principal." Educational Administration Quarterly. Spring:19-28; 1965.

5. The Highland Park Junior High School in Beaverton, Oregon undertook an extensive program in organizational training to facilitate a more dynamic program. The complete report of this project is presented in: Schmuck, R.A. and P.J. Runkel. Organizational Training for a School Faculty. Eugene, Oregon: The Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, 1970.